

Beaven, Brad: *Visions of Empire. Patriotism, Popular Culture and the City, 1870–1939*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 2012. ISBN: 978-0-7190-7856-9; 234 S.

Rezensiert von: Christopher Miller, Eberhard Karls University Tübingen

Brad Beaven's *Visions of Empire* is one of a number of monographs in Manchester University Press's 'Studies in Imperialism' series examining in a scholarly manner the broad concept of 'popular culture' within the British Empire. Indeed, over the past several decades and several dozen monographs, the series has been at the forefront of research into Imperialism in myriad forms; from civil aviation and sea transport, to sexuality, race and even garden cities. Brad Beaven's work tackles another, although not new, area of research within this broad framework: that of patriotism and popular enthusiasm for the imperial project. This question of the nature of Britain's 'imperial culture' has, for almost thirty years, been hotly contested; it is a debate which was fostered by John MacKenzie (now the series' editor) and his early work on major 'imperial cities' such as Glasgow, and perseveres still today. Beaven, however, offers a fresh and somewhat novel perspective, and shifts the focus away from the metropolises, London (or even Glasgow) to the provincial – namely Coventry, Leeds and Portsmouth.

The book, Beaven notes, „focuses on the process of dissemination of imperialism, the form it took and its consumption by those living in contrasting English cities“ (p. 1). For these reasons the cities picked by Beaven make a certain degree of sense. Portsmouth was heavily reliant on the navy, and situated on the South Coast; Coventry in the midlands, boomed under the second wave of industrialisation that brought bicycles, cars and ultimately aeroplanes to it; Leeds, four times the size of Coventry in 1911 and nearly three times larger than Portsmouth, is the northernmost of Beaven's cases and was by then a long-established centre of textile manufacture. The years 1870–1939 are similarly well chosen. This was a period of substantial change within the Empire and British policy more generally: as an industrial power Britain

was caught and then overtaken by both the United States and the newly-united Germany towards the end of the 19th century, while the debacle surrounding Britain's performance in the Boer War after 1902 prompted much public soul-searching into questions of 'national efficiency' and Britain's place in the world. This would, of course, give way to a rapid expansion of the electoral franchise, a naval race, the Great War, and finally disarmament and a massive rearmament, all before the conclusion of Beaven's work. Importantly: it should be remembered that war, disarmament and rearmament had profound effects upon the Empire more widely – Portsmouth and particularly Coventry were cities which both acutely felt the effects and reaped the industrial dividends of change.

At the heart of the question then, was how the imperial message was portrayed within these cities – from schoolroom to theatre to regional newspapers – and how well (or with what success) it was received. From there, the book proceeds in a logical and straightforward manner: following a survey of the extensive existing literature, Beaven moves through chapters on journalism, education and mass entertainment, each with their own separate conclusions concerning the findings from his three chosen cities. By examining these themes he demonstrates convincingly that this imperial message was not unchanging, uniform or uniformly received. Instead, he argues that it was subject to augmentation and „adapted by Civic Leaders to address local anxieties, enhance civic reputations and engage the local populace“ (p. 88). For example, in classrooms the role of the Empire differed greatly in teaching between working-class Portsmouth – where schoolmasters bought wholeheartedly into the post-Boer War national efficiency movement and sought to improve the physical and moral standing of their pupils through navy-style exercises – and Leeds, where it was believed necessary to promote patriotism among minority groups, such as Jews. With regard to public celebrations, similar differences are set out, highlighting what Beaven describes as the „complexities of endeavouring to transmit a uniform celebration of Empire across the country“. *Visions of Empire* is full of exam-

ples like this, and, on the whole, his case is well made.

In such a short book however, there is inevitably omissions and details which perhaps warranted being more substantially examined. While Beaven clearly knows and understands a great deal about the Boer War in its Imperial context, the interwar years are rather lighter on detail. For example, the industry in Coventry is mentioned only very briefly, yet of the three cities, Coventry's change with regard to Empire and industry was the most striking. Before 1914, the navy – and by extension Portsmouth – was near the centre of British defence. The Royal Dockyards and in earlier times the Royal Naval Academy in Portsmouth were a source of great pride to the city which could, with some authority, claim to be central to a period when 'Britannia ruled the waves'. However, after 1918, the focus shifted slowly but deliberately towards a new way of war based on tanks, bombers and fighters and transformed Coventry from a munitions works into one of the main focal points of the British war effort before and during WWII. Thus, the population of Coventry soared in the 1920s and 1930s, while shipbuilding cities like Portsmouth and Glasgow stagnated. Moreover, unlike ships, the weapons built in Coventry were primarily to be used defending Britain in Europe, rather than far-flung Imperial possessions.

In other words, in the defence of empire, the relative fortunes and experiences of Coventry and Portsmouth diverged in the last two decades of Beaven's study, and an analysis for what this in particular meant for the imperial message in these cities would have been a very worthwhile contribution to the debate on patriotism and imperial defence. Given that Beaven explains the difference in local reactions to empire by suggesting citizens viewed empire through a local lens, and argues that to them it was mainly about what it meant for the place in which they lived, it could be said that extending his study to this area may have provided some interesting findings and conclusions.

This criticism is, however, minor and reflects as much the reviewer's interests as it does the author's. Though unquestionably stronger in the years before 1914, on the

whole Brad Beaven has provided a thought-provoking and well-researched study which adds considerably to our understanding of patriotism and the imperial message, and as such deserves to be read and engaged with.

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